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ABSTRACT

A counseling service follow-up questionnaire was constructed to include both process and outcome measures. The questionnaire was mailed to students who had been counseled at a university counseling centre. The follow-up results from 207 students provided global evidence of students' satisfaction with treatment. In order to refine and shorten this initial questionnaire and to provide more than simply a global measure of client reaction, the original items were evaluted on the basis of three criteria. In the first place, items were chosen if they were answered at least 90% of the time in the appropriate response format. Secondly, the items were required to show concurrent validity in that they permitted meaningful discriminations to be made between practicum and experienced counselors. Thirdly, the items chosen permitted an understanding of the relationship between counseling process and outcome. This refinement process led to the identification of a core set of 31 questions and related measures which provided a valid data base for service accountability. The items also provided information concerning process and outcome variables having potential implications for effective counseling. (Author)

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Refinement of a Follow-Up Questionnaire designed to measure Counseling Process and Outcome

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Refinement of a Follow-Up Questionnaire Designed to Measure Counseling Process and Outcome

Recently, the call for evaluation of the effects of guidance and counseling has been prominent and well-documented. For example, Graff, Raque and Danish (1974) take the position that with our present lack of sophistication and knowledge about the effects of counseling, continual evaluative research should be of primary concern to practitioners. Similar articles, along with the recent administrative cutbacks in social services, have no doubt sensitized practitioners to the need for formal evaluation of counseling services. Moreover, various assessment approaches and tools have been prescribed. However, the gap between insight and action is often problematic. A survey of 60 United States counseling services by Graff, et. al (1974) revealed evaluation to be the exception, rather than the rule. Less than half of the centres surveyed reported that they were involved in formal evaluation of their services.

Findings similar to those of Graff et. al. were revealed in our own informal survey of 28 Canadian university counseling centres. Less than half of the 17 centres responding to the survey indicated that they were involved in some form of systematic evaluation of their counseling services. However, all respondents to the survey expressed an interest in receiving information about the experiences and results of other centres using formalized evaluative methods. In response to this expressed interest, the present paper summarizes the attempts made by one university counseling centre to develop and refine their evaluative device.

A common evaluative technique has been the follow-up questionnaire

(Hurst and Weigel, 1969; Pine, 1975). Such a technique has strengths (e.g. anonymity and minimal demand characteristics) as well as limitations (e.g. low response rates). Practitioners planning to use the follow-up technique begin by generating agreed upon counseling outcome objectives (Lasser, 1975) and related follow-up questions. First efforts usually result in a shotgun-type of questionnaire which is mailed to ex-clients. Follow-up returns tend to lead to a morass of data which indicates generally positive client reactions. Unfortunately, follow-up efforts often stop here and omit a very crucial stage of evaluation. To complete the cycle, it is necessary to evaluate the evaluative tool. Specifically, with the follow-up method it is important to distill from the original questionnaire the best items which will form the core of an improved follow-up instrument for the next round of evaluation.

The process of refining a follow-up instrument requires some decisions about appropriate discriminative criteria. That is, by what standards will certain items be maintained and others dropped.

An obvious criterion for follow-up questions is that they be unambiguous. Questions which are omitted, misread, or incorrectly answered with a high frequency should be eliminated. In spite of counseling efforts to formulate questions as clearly as possible, the only good test of whether items are correctly interpreted is to look at the response trends of a large sample of clients.

Beyond technical considerations, the major item suitability issue is that of the validity of follow-up measures. Thompson and Wise (1976) have used a discriminent function analysis whereby questions which correlate most highly with a measure of overall counseling satisfaction are maintained. Hence Thompson and Wise have looked for predictive validity. In this study

the focus was primarily on concurrent validity. We were looking for items which permitted meaningful discriminations between groups that would be expected to differ. Conditions in the counseling service permitted the identification of two validational samples - practicum students and experienced counselors. The follow-up results of clients seen by graduate counseling students, who were working at the service to obtain their first practicum experience, were compared to the follow-up results of clients seen by the experienced counselors. It was predicted that sensitive follow-up measures would reveal differences in favour of the experienced counselors.

The final selection criterion for refining the follow-up questionnaire involved identifying measures which permitted some understanding of the relationship between counseling process and outcome. The plan was to correlate process measures with outcome measures and cull those questions which showed the most consistent, significant correlations. This last standard represents an attempt to fashion a follow-up instrument to provide information which is profitable to counselors as well as administrators.

In summary, this study employed three criteria to identify unambiguous, concurrently valid questions which would provide some insight into the relationship between counseling process and outcome.

Method

Questionnaire

The original follow-up instrument was seven pages in length and included a total of 64 questions. Forty of these questions were generated by the counseling staff in relation to the educational, vocational, and personal concerns dealt with at the counseling service. Questions were designed to tap both counseling process and counseling outcome, and thereby permit an

understanding of the relationship between the two. All items called for responses on a five-point scale. The follow-up instrument included questions about; (a) the counselor's ability to understand the client's concern, (b) the importance and value of resource specialists, (c) changes in client self-awareness, (d) changes in client decision-making, (e) the overall effectiveness of counseling, and (f) the physical surroundings of the counseling service. Of special interest were questions dealing with the counseling relationship which called for the client's evaluation of a counselor's level of regard, empathic understanding, unconditionality of regard, congruence , and concreteness. The questions which yielded measures of regard, empathy, unconditionality, and congruence were taken from the Barrett-Lennard Relationship Inventory (1971). Of the original 16 items which composed each scale, 3 positive items and 3 negative items were randomly selected for inclusion in the follow-up questionnaire. Six similar items were generated to measure concreteness (e.g. My counsellor often wanted me to give concrete examples of what I was talking about).

Sample and Procedure

The follow-up questionnaire was mailed to university students who had terminated individual counseling. Only those students involved in more than one counseling session received a questionnaire. Mailings were conducted at three month intervals and included an explanatory cover letter and a stamped return envelope. During a 12 month period 365 questionnaires were mailed to the clients of seven counselors and eight graduate practicum students. Returned questionnaires were obtained from 130 females and 93 males, which represents a return rate of 61 percent.

Results

The criteria for identifying the best follow-up questions were applied to the data. To begin with, questions which were not answered at least 90% of the time using the appropriate response format were eliminated. These questions were designated as having secondary follow-up value. The remaining questions and measures were separated into those which dealt with counseling process and those which dealt with counseling outcome. These measures were evaluated for concurrent validity using the identified validational samples. Finally, all process measures were correlated with all outcome measures. Questions and measures which showed evidence of either concurrent validity, or significant correlations between process and outcome were identified as the best follow-up items. This "short-list" of eleven measures representing 31 questions is presented in Table 1. Table 1 also shows the range of possible scores and the overall mean ratings received by the service. On all measures mean service scores were above the midpoint of each scale, and in many cases close to the highest possible ratings.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Table 2 presents the results and comparisons for the validational samples. Ratings received by the graduate practicum students were compared to the ratings of a random sample of the clients of experienced counselors. On five of six process measures and on four of five outcome measures differences were significant ($p < .05$, or $p < .01$, $df = 66$) in a direction favouring experienced counselors.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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The intercorrelation matrix for the eleven best follow-up measures is presented in Table 3. The single highest correlation between process and outcome related the degree to which clients perceived themselves agreeing with the counselor on the approach to their concern, and their ratings of the overall degree of assistance that the counselor provided. Table 3 also reveals that the process variable showing the most consistently high significant relationship with all of the outcome measures was empathic understanding. The Relationship Inventory subscales measuring regard, empathy, congruence and concreteness were highly intercorrelated. Outcome measures also showed high and significant correlations among themselves.

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Insert Table 3 about here

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Discussion

The application of three criteria designed to determine which were the best questions in a counseling follow-up questionnaire resulted in the identification of 31 questions which yielded 11 measures of counseling process and outcome. Each of the 31 questions was shown to be clearly interpretable by a large sample of clients. In addition, the measures of process and outcome were shown to have good concurrent validity. Indeed, the meaningful discriminations between experienced and novice counselors revealed a degree of sensitivity often unexpected in a follow-up questionnaire.

The correlational analysis relating process measures to outcome measures permitted a more detailed understanding of the data showing global student satisfaction with counseling. The high correlation between client agree-

ment with approach utilized and ratings of counselor assistance recommends further investigation of the causal links between these variables. Indeed, other research has indicated that client agreement with counseling approach is an important determinant of outcome. Devine and Fernald (1973), for example, found that snake phobic subjects assigned to their preferred therapy showed significantly more fear reduction than either randomly assigned subjects or subjects assigned to a non-preferred therapy. It would seem worthwhile to pursue further the effects of this variable in counseling settings. Another process variable which was noticeable in terms of its consistent relationship with outcome was empathic understanding. This finding might have been expected in view of the considerable research showing empathy to be an important determinant of counseling outcome (Truax and Carkhuff, 1967).

Although encouraged by the results of this study, the authors acknowledge some limitations of the research. First, the scale characteristics for the abbreviated version of the Barrett-Lennard Relationship Inventory and the concreteness measure were not determined. Although there is no reason to expect major changes in the reliability and validity of the Relationship Inventory scales, the psychometric properties of these abbreviated measures should be investigated. Second, although the return rate of follow-up questionnaires was relatively high (61 percent), and comparable to the return rates of similar recent studies (e.g. Thompson and Wise, 1976) the validity of results based upon incomplete samples must remain tentative. In the future those involved in follow-up procedures might direct more effort to tracking down non-responders to determine whether they represent a significantly different sample. Finally, response bias might have contributed to some of the positive correlations between process and outcome measures. The Relationship Inventory

scales and the concreteness scale used both positively and negatively worded questions. However, most of the five-point scale questions were framed only in a positive direction. Those developing follow-up measures should be sensitive to the issue of response bias.

In summary, the results of refining our follow-up questionnaire were valuable in several important ways. First, and foremost, was the identification of a core set of questions and related measures with demonstratable validity for use in formal evaluation of counseling services. Secondly, the data from these measures provides a valid base for counseling service accountability. Finally, the follow-up results have sensitized our staff to potentially significant relationships between counseling process and outcome, and also have suggested further directions for future research.

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TABLE 1

Process Items	Possible Range of Scores
1. Do you feel your counsellor understood your basic reason(s) for coming to the service?	1 - 5
2. Did you and your counsellor agree on the approach to be used?	1 - 5
3. Level of Regard (6 items)	-12 to +12
4. Empathic Understanding (6 items)	-12 to +12
5. Congruence (6 items)	-12 to +12
6. Concreteness (6 items)	-12 to +12

Outcome Items	
A. Did your counsellor assist you in figuring out how to work on your concern(s)?	1 - 5
B. Did you leave EVC with the feeling that you got what you wanted out of the service?	1 - 5
C. Was your contact with EVC a valuable learning experience?	1 - 5
D. In general, how useful do you think the service is for university students like yourself?	1 - 5
E. How strongly would you recommend the service to your friends?	1 - 5

TABLE 2

Descriptive Statistics for Counselling Service and

Comparisons Between Experienced and Novice Counsellors

Item	Service Overall n = 207[1]		Sample 1 Practicum Students n = 34		Sample 2 Experienced Counsellors n = 34		Sample 1 versus Sample 2
	$\bar{X}$	$S^2_{\bar{x}}$	$\bar{X}$	$S^2_{\bar{x}}$	$\bar{X}$	$S^2_{\bar{x}}$	t
Process							
1. Counsellor understood basic reasons for coming	4.22	0.65	3.97	0.97	4.18	0.97	0.88
2. Agree on approach to be used	3.86	1.16	2.91	2.49	3.97	0.79	3.41**
3. Level of Regard	5.87	7.97	4.88	10.22	6.12	7.28	1.73*
4. Empathic Understanding	4.93	8.90	3.12	14.10	4.56	7.31	1.81*
5. Congruence	5.36	10.53	3.91	15.61	5.79	8.57	2.23*
6. Concreteness	5.45	8.65	3.79	8.52	5.35	11.35	2.04*
Outcome							
A. Did counsellor assist you in working on your concern	4.02	0.92	3.26	1.84	4.06	0.88	2.82**
B. Did you get what you wanted from the service	4.02	1.29	3.44	1.48	4.00	1.29	1.96*
C. Was your contact a valuable learning experience	3.73	1.41	2.85	1.89	3.71	1.21	2.85**
D. How useful is the service for university students	4.41	0.96	4.09	1.08	4.38	0.65	1.29
E. Would you recommend the service to friends	4.42	0.75	3.97	1.26	4.41	0.71	1.83*

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$

[1] This represents the number of follow-up returns with complete responses to all process and outcome questions.

TABLE 3

Correlations Between Process and Outcome Items

for Follow-Up Questionnaire

Process	1	2	3	4	5	6	A	B	C	D	E
1. Counsellor understood basic reasons for coming	-										
2. Agree on approach to be used	.24	-									
3. Level of Regard	.36	.26	-								
4. Empathic Understanding	.46	.45	.63	-							
5. Congruence	.36	.30	.58	.65	-						
6. Concreteness	.32	.37	.35	.57	.50	-					
Outcome											
A. Did counsellor assist you in working on your concern	.32	.60	.40	.51	.33	.43	-				
B. Did you get what you wanted form the service	.38	.33	.29	.41	.26	.39	.46	-			
C. Was your contact a valuable learning experience	.39	.32	.33	.57	.31	.43	.53	.54	-		
D. How useful is the service for university students	.17	.14	.15	.30	.24	.24	.29	.27	.43	-	
E. Would you recommend the service to friends	.35	.33	.30	.43	.27	.34	.47	.46	.53	.47	-

[1]All correlations greater than .23 are significant at $p < .001$, $n = 207$